Two solar projects are ready for service

K Kaufmann, Palm Springs Desert Sun, 4-28-11

Solar power in the Coachella Valley takes another leap forward today and Friday as two commercial-scale projects come online, both using the latest technology.

The city of Coachella today unveils a new 420-kilowatt concentrated photovoltaic, or CPV, installation at its water reclamation plant on Avenue 54.

Granite Construction Co. of Indio follows Friday with an event for its new 355-kilowatt CPV system at its asphalt plant on Monroe Street.

The unintended close timing of the two events underlines how both solar technology and financing options are advancing to make such commercial- sized projects pencil out for both cities and businesses.

“CPV has been around for 10 years; commercially, it's only recently been deployed,” said Todd Michaels, senior vice president at Solar Power Partners, the San Francisco Bay Area solar company working with Coachella on its project.

“It really only makes sense in places with very intense sun levels,” he said. “It's perfect for places like the Southwest.”

On the financial side, grants and rebates from the Imperial Irrigation District, along with federal tax credits, have been crucial for both projects.

“IID will pay us up to $780,000 based on our particular production,” said Lee Haven, business development manager for Granite.

“We anticipate it will take about 5 years to recapture the incentives.”

The system will pump out about 800,000 kilowatt-hours of electricity per year, or 75 percent of the power needed to run the asphalt plant. Excess power will feed back into the IID grid, he said.

U.S. households average 11,040 kilowatt-hours per year, the Department of Energy says.

California households average 6,960 kilowatt-hours per year.

A $1 million grant from IID also was a key driver for Coachella's $2.7 million project, Mayor Eduardo Garcia said.

The system will cover about 40 percent of the reclamation plant's daytime power needs while saving the city $30,000- annually just in the generating side, he said.